The Final Plunge

KIDS SHORT STORIES

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ZEENAT IQBAL HAKIMJEE

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THE FINAL PLUNGE

Short Stories

for

Children

(REVISED EDITION)

By

ZEENAT IQBAL HAKIMJEE

D/o. Late Ahmed F. Jivanjee

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The Damaged Horse Shoe

THE horse was the most common means of transport for hundreds of years. Before the tractor was invented, the horse was often used to pull farm machinery. It is still used for work on ranches, but most horses are now kept for pleasure. People ride them, watch them perform and enjoy them in sports such as Polo, Hunting and Racing.

The following is the story of a racehorse and the people

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to whom he belonged. It was the day of the Derby. With their horses' manes trimmed and shining, the participants got ready for the pistol shot, indicating the start of the race. It was an event that people looked forward to. It was a sport enjoyed by the young and old alike. Bets were placed on the horses, and the winners were left with a handsome sum of money.

Mark, the proud owner of a racehorse, whispered something into Godfather's (the name of the horse) ear. These 'sweet nothings' brought a smile to Godfather's lips. It contributed to Godfather's victory in the race. The owner also gave some advice to David, the jockey. David was a short and strong fellow. He fitted snugly in the saddle, just as a glove fitted the hand. He had started his career as a jockey with Godfather and longed to end it with him. The age of any horse can be told by looking at its teeth; Godfather's teeth showed that he still had plenty of race years to go before he retired.

Also present was Mark's wife. She always accompanied him to the race. "Godfather is lucky. He gets all your attention." She would tell him. But deep down in her heart, she knew she would not have had it anyway. She cared for Godfather, too, and would tend to his needs whenever she

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could spare time. "I think the trough of water is empty," she'd say with concern, beckoning her staff to fill the trough up. An insect bit Godfather once. Richard, the horse keeper, bathed and dressed his wound so well that Godfather was up and about in half the time than usual. Godfather loved Richard and would show it by cuddling up to him. This was Godfather's family.

The people who cared for him were responsible for his consecutive victories. They were all there with him to see him run the race.

A few minutes before the race began, David mounted Godfather and rode down to the start. But little did Mark or David know what was in store for them. Another horse owner, Mark's enemy, could not bear Godfather winning all the time. And to ensure that Mark's horse would not win this time, he thought of a plan. He suggested to the trainer of his horse that they must visit Godfather's blacksmith. "It won't take us very long," he sneered. The trainer, who was a little confused, asked, "What wouldn't take us long?" To this, the vicious man replied, "You'd see."

The deceitful man, when the time was just right (as he knew the time Godfather came to the blacksmith as well as the

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time when the

Blacksmith left his seat) damaged Godfather's shoe. The nail ends that showed through the horse's hoof were wrung off and turned back. He straightened them, hoping the shoe would come off during the race. He damaged the shoe so deftly that Godfather did not feel it immediately.

Finally, the starter signalled the start of the race. Godfather took the lead, so erect, so graceful. His poise was proof of the fact that he would be very hard to defeat. There he went like a bolt of lightning. He moved so fast that just when you thought you had focused on him, he moved ahead. He had almost reached the finishing line when the nail of the shoe straightened and got loose, unbalancing Godfather, who stumbled and stopped in his tracks before any further damage could occur. A race official came to guide them off the track. Godfather, Mark, Richard, and Mark's wife, David, were all shocked. They failed to understand what had happened.

Sometime after they had recovered from the shock of the damaged horseshoe, Mark and the trainer accompanied Godfather to the blacksmith's. They were there to have Godfather's old shoes removed. Also present was the man who

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had damaged Godfather's shoe. He was there with his horse.

Godfather instinctively trotted towards this man, lifted the foot with the damaged horseshoe and started nodding.

This scared the evil man, and before the horse could burst into anger, he confessed: "I, I, was responsible," he stuttered and went down on his knees to apologize. Mark, who was a soft man, accepted his apology. Thus ended the story of the evil man and his horse, and Godfather awaited his next victory yet again.

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Not Guilty

My hand shook as I held the test tube containing the concentrated acid. I was already well aware of what would happen if even a little bit of this harmless-looking solution fell onto you. With my heart pounding like a drum inside my chest, I walked cautiously towards the chemistry lab.

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Just as I entered the lab, the bell rang. It was time for our physics test. Not finding anything to put the acid in, I reached for that drinking glass lying on the far end of my table. Quickly pouring the water into the sink, I replaced it with the acid in my hand. And after placing the glass back on the table, I raced into my physics class, forgetting about the acid.

My bedroom door flew open, and my father stood shouting at the top of his voice, telling me to get ready or I would be late. I jumped out of bed, got ready and left for school without breakfast.

I was late as usual. I also had detention as usual, but today I felt a bit disturbed; not knowing why, I tried to catch a wink just before the class started. But just as I was about to fall asleep, the classroom door swung open, and there he stood, the man we all dreaded the most, our Principal. He told me to follow him towards his office. I knew I was in some trouble.

With trembling legs and sweaty hands, I followed him to his office like a slave following his master. In his office, the Principal pointed me to sit next to a person who seemed to be an inspector. I did as I was told. I still learned what it was all about when the inspector mentioned the word 'acid.' I slapped

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my forehead and cursed myself. I knew I had forgotten something. Anyway, the inspector told me there was an accident yesterday involving the teacher and the acid, and they had reason to believe I was responsible for it. This came to me as a shock. With my mouth wide open, I stared at the inspector.

Gaining some confidence, I finally replied, "But sir, I also left the chemistry lab with everyone else when the period finished," trying to act as innocent as possible.

But the expression on the inspector’s face remained the same as he said, “But you did re-enter the room after everyone else had left and you also put the fatal substance in the glass”.

I knew I had done something very wrong, so I told the entire story about the previous day's incident to the inspector. When I finished my story, my eyes were full of tears, and I almost cried. Feeling sorry for me, the Principal asked me to return to class.

I spent the whole day in misery until after school was over. The Principal called me and took me to the hospital, where the teacher was admitted. I gathered some flowers and went to see the teacher alone. As I entered the room, my eyes were full of tears, and I felt miserable when I saw the teacher's

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condition. After looking at the teacher, I wanted to kill myself, but I could do nothing.

The teacher slowly asked me to come closer. I sat beside him, gave him the flowers, and finally managed to say, "Sorry." And even after what I had done to kill him, the teacher took my hand and replied, "Don't worry, it could happen to anyone."

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The Final Plunge

THE morning rays of the sun filter through the glass in the cell at Alcatraz; this is the only connection with the outside world. As Joseph, serving a death sentence, basks in the rays, he hears a shriek from a cell down the corridor. The sound is familiar. It is from a mentally deranged inmate. The attendant serves him breakfast consisting of dried toast and tea. With a wicked look, he tells Joseph, "Eat up; you are lucky to get this." Everybody in Alcatraz is wicked, thinks Joseph.

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The time for menial labour nears, but he has already 'burnt' his breakfast, so he prepares to work on an empty stomach. The warden opens his cell and leads him to where he will break stones with a pick. The warden tells a young boy, "The more hours you put into your work, the shorter the time of your sentence." Joseph's eye focuses on the boy. What could his crime be? He had stolen some goods from a grocer at gunpoint. The grocer had tried to stop him, and the gun the boy fired in panic had hit him. The boy was given a lawyer, who had lost the case to the grocer.

Joseph's son must be of the same age. His thoughts wander back to when he perched his son on the bicycle to drop him off at school. "Come on, son, we will stop on the way, and you can buy yourself a chocolate." He loved his children. He also had a daughter. His daughter loved to listen to the stories that he would tell. She sat on his lap, with her gaze fixed on him, devouring every word of the story he uttered. As he reflected on the past, he felt his heart sink. But did it sink? The prison had hardened him, hardened a man capable of being passionate to the letter E. How did this come about?

He had been caught red-handed, holding the weapon that

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had killed Brown. Brown was a cruel arms dealer. He had many enemies. They were all out to get him. He sold inferior arms, and a couple of times, they had backfired, causing deaths. It so happened that Joseph visited the arms shop on the day that the dealer was killed. He was lying dead on the floor when Joseph entered the shop. As he picked up the gun that had killed the dealer, somebody entered the shop and thought he had caught the murderer red-handed.

And here he was in the cell serving punishment for a crime he had not committed.

Again, his thoughts went back to his son. Well, they did now and then. But this time, a tear rolled down his cheek. So, he was still capable of crying. Like all fathers, he had been full of ideas of what he would do with his son's life when he was born. Another tear and another, they would not stop.

Not long after, news spread in the prison about a team of producers arriving from Hollywood. They were looking for a stuntman. One day, Joseph found himself facing a producer. Joseph was a well-built man. The producer looked closely at him. "You are the perfect choice". Then, the producer briefed him. "I shall come with my unit". The film had a shot of a

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plunge from a bridge into a rapid flow beneath the bridge. The rapids were also full of rocks. The producer told him, "If you live after the final plunge, you are free. What do you stand to lose?" He further added, "You are serving a death sentence, so even if you die from your plunge, it should not make much of a difference."

The above arrangement had been made between the film folk and the prison authorities.

Wearing the costume given to him by the clothes designer for the film, he stood on the bridge from where he was required to dive. The film unit took many takes, and the day drew close when he was to take the final plunge from Alcatraz. He would either live or die.

He stood on the bridge, poised to dive, his eyes scanning the rocks and the empty spaces in between. He knew the empty spaces so well. He knew them with his eyes closed. He had studied them thoroughly. He saw his son waiting for him on the bank with an outstretched arm beckoning Joseph to come to him.

The signal for the dive was given, and with the cameras

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in position, Joseph leapt into mid-air, and the outstretched arm met him as his head touched the water. He had made it. The rock was at a short distance, but he had made it.

He did not surface for quite some time. He was underwater, and he would not surface now. Not till he could hold his breath. He was free and did not want even the slightest obstacle to come his way. Maybe an obstacle would come his way if he were to surface soon. He was disillusioned with the human race and had grounds for this. He had just held the gun that had killed the arms dealer, and they had locked him up for eternity till this producer came along. And it seemed like his son's arm was beckoning him. He could not wait to be reunited with his family, and now it seemed like the time to be with them was near. Hope against hope of meeting them now seemed possible.

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My Friend the Tree

YOU should have heard it. First, there was a loud creaking noise and a thud followed by a 'Whoosh!'

Whatever could have happened? I jumped up from my typewriter. I was writing a story when I ran to the window to see what was happening. There, right below my window, lay the great old pine tree.

Ongoing outside to examine the tree, I noticed it had broken in half. The trunk had split from the middle.

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Years ago, such trees were common when I was a boarder at a Convent in Murree.

It seemed such a pity that this tree had taken twenty years to reach its present size. And now, in one brief moment, it had become a wreck, only fit for firewood. It had provided shade for us, standing tall, close to my house.

The cause of its decay was not hard to find. Right where the break had come, I could see the telltale signs of decay. This was the first time anyone noticed this. Indeed, to all appearances, this tree was as strong and healthy as any other near it, but the weakness was there just the same, slowly getting worse month after month and year after year.

As I recollected memories of my past, I saw myself clad in jeans, about to climb my tree house built on this particular tree. I remembered the immense pleasure it had brought friends, my family and me. Could the place be such a great source of pleasure? This was a question that crept into the heads of my houseguests when I would tell them of my tree house. And then I'd take them there, and they too went away convinced it was.

Experiencing the songs of the birds, the fresh air touching

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the cheeks, and the sight of the sun and the moon made them all wish they had a place like this.

As for my children, I had tied a hammock on the tree so they slept well.

Alas, it was sheer neglect that had brought about the decay. I was too busy enjoying my life, and my husband was busy earning money for our family. Still, sometimes, I talked to my tree. The wind whistling through the branches may be my reply. Yes, my tree would respond to me this way. As I spoke about it to the outsiders, my question-answer session seemed like my imagination going wild to them.

I became sad as it lay there, reminding me it was only good for firewood. My son, who was my best companion, too, came to me. He had sensed my sorrow.

My young man, my son, was a champion cyclist who rode around in the neighborhood. He got me specimens of trees and told me to select one for planting. Such gestures of his and the circulars that my husband brought home, full of information from his horticultural society meetings, made me feel better. I may also start thinking about a new tree in the garden.

One day, as I took my early morning walk, I saw a small

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plant staring at me from the base where my tree had once stood. The seed of the parent tree had given birth to this plant. Its roots take possession of the space. A ripe green shoot was giving me proof of the continuity of life.

Another story built up in my mind. A story with a happy ending. This little plant gave me reason to be joyous.

My husband explained the phenomenon to his society. And I did not tell him that the reason behind the growth of my plant was my talking to it. My friend had left a souvenir in its place. One that would always keep its memory alive in my heart.

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The Missing Jewel

THE queen wore it in her crown. She looked so regal with the jewel shining in her crown, like water in a pond with the sun shining above it. The jewel was priceless, and the price was determined, but not so accurately. It could not be so, as this particular jewel had a long story behind it.

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And so it goes. To the North of the equator and in the tropic of Capricorn, there existed a land of which two rival bodies claimed ownership. These rival bodies that co-existed previously had now developed a lot of differences. So, as the new generation came forth, it came with its peculiarities. The foremost difference was religion, and at the bottom of the list was the dress. These differences grew enormities, again leading to war sparked by a country that ruled over them.

In this land was born Ali. Ali was taught in school about brotherhood. He was told that all the boys in his class were his brothers. Ali's so-called brother Natoo's father was a barber. Now, Ali's father went to Natoo's father for a haircut. Natoo looked down upon Ali's father. But Ali's father needed somewhere else to go since Natoo's father's shop was close to his house.

Mr. Brown, who belonged to the ruling class, thought the world of himself. He would not even sit on the chair Ali's father and his companions had sat on. "Ali, Mr. Brown wants you to go to his house because he said he wants you to clean it."

Although it hurt his pride, he knew he would have to go

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because Ali's father worked for Mr. Brown. It hurt his pride because Mr. Brown thought cleaning was a petty job.

"Ali, pick up this piece of furniture and put it there." Mr. Brown pointed with his finger to where he wanted it kept. The furniture was so heavy that Ali bent over while picking it up. Such a job was difficult for years, but he had to do it.

Such were the conditions in which Ali was brought up. Others, like Ali and Nattoo, fought with each other, and Mr. Brown cashed in on it. The queen of Mr. Brown's country dominated and ruled with an iron fist. She was also known for her greed.

Ali's father read the headlines to Ali one day, "Jewel missing from the museum." Ali listened with interest and asked his father, "Who could have taken it, Dad?" His father remained silent as he did not have the answer.

The next day, Ali went to school carrying a satchel. The topic of discussion among his friends was the jewel. Natoo agreed with Ali about the disappearance of the jewel and who was responsible. They both agreed that the queen was greedy and she could have done it.

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They also knew the queen's minister had visited their land a few days ago. The reason for his visit was still a mystery. But the timing was similar. The timing of the jewel's disappearance and the minister's arrival. Sure enough, a few days later, a news item in the newspaper read, 'Queen's crown studded with heirloom jewel missing.' The jewel belonged to Ali and Natoo's land as it was mined there. But Mr. Brown's people got away with it because Ali and Natoo's people did not get along. They were busy fighting with each other.

This lesson of life has taught them the hard way.

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My Teacher

She was more like a parent. This I was to discover later. At the start of the class, she stood before her students, and the class buzzed with "Absent Miss!" and "Present Miss!" as she marked the attendance register. School was a humdrum affair. I must admit that I would get out of bed with great difficulty.

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My mom woke me up at the stroke of seven. I longed for an extra half hour on my warm, cozy bed. But she wouldn't allow it. She approached my room twice and sometimes thrice to ensure I had gotten out of bed.

“I do not want to go to school today,” I would tell her.

"Nothing was doing," she would say. The teacher with the spectacles perched on her nose seemed strict initially. I discovered later that she was just the opposite. Science was taught to class V students, and that's why I, too, had to study it no matter how much I hated the subject. I couldn't make heads or tails of what the teacher was saying.

I was not a clever student but was rated as being average. Sometimes, my results left much to be desired. Each time my report card was sent home to be signed, I was scolded and put to shame. Having a clever older brother did little to improve my position at home. I played truant from school many times. I was not very keen to go. And so I would spend the day in a park close to my home.

"Today I was scolded by my parents for not bringing better results," I told a friend.

The parents had arranged for a tutor. They realized later

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that this was to make little difference. The other day, a child psychologist in a television programme said many things about parent-child relationships. I wondered why my parents didn't do what she said. Maybe they needed to be more smart. She said parents should praise their children if they do a good deed. They should not scold the children in front of their friends.

One day, I told my teacher about my brother. I told her that he was smarter than me. And my parents did not let both of us forget this. I was surprised to see my teacher return after school the next day. Her husband came to pick her up, but she refused to leave. Instead, she called me to her side, and from that day onwards, she made it a point to coach me personally.

One day, I went with her to the park for a stroll, and it was there that she explained to me the importance of parents. She made me realize that parents were seldom wrong, making me see the logic behind their arguments. She gave me the confidence that I lacked. It was she who made me a stronger person. The two words, school and teacher, which had been unimportant to me a short time ago, slowly became the center of my life. And I became completely engrossed in my studies. We were nearing the end of the term, and our exams started

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soon.

At least this time, I was not frightened. I clung to the result card in my hand. My heart fluttered as I made my way home. My mother could not help being surprised upon seeing my grades. She quickly rang up my father to share the news with him. He came back home beaming and holding a parcel under his arm. It was a cake to celebrate my success. But I knew it was more like my teacher's success. She had shown me what it meant to have a purpose in life. She had given up her hours of rest to teach me.

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FROM BAD TO GOOD

Isaac and his friends stole money from people. They also indulged in other bad deeds. A day came when their money finished. They were used to eating good food. They also wore good clothes. All this they got from the money they stole.

One of the friends told Isaac, "The boss of the Plane Company has lots of money."

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“There’s a lot of money in kidnapping,” said another. “Let’s kidnap his son. We shall get a lot of ransom money”.

They all sat down together to make a plan to kidnap the rich man’s son. It would be done in the afternoon when he was returning from school. They sat in the bushes on the road from where the boy passed.

The school was over. The boy, Andrew, was returning home. Suddenly, someone jumped from behind the bushes. He put a gag in the boy's mouth. The boy wanted to scream, but he could not. The bad men bundled him into a car and took him to a house. It was very far from the city. They had also blindfolded him so he could not see where he was being taken. They carried Andrew inside and locked him in a room upon reaching their destination. Then, they called up his father to inform him about the kidnapping. He was told to pay a million rupees.

Andrew’s parents were shocked.

They did not know what to do. His father tried to arrange for the money.

Meanwhile, Andrew and Isaac met. Isaac brought Andrew something to eat. Andrew thanked him. Sometimes,

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Isaac would sit with Andrew and talk to him. He told him that he, too, had once been a good boy. He had turned bad because he did not have any money. He had tried getting a job but had failed.

"Do not fret. I shall ask my father to give you a job, but only if you free me." Andrew said to Isaac. Isaac liked Andrew because of his good habits. While eating together, Andrew would always ask Isaac to eat first.

As time passed, they became good friends. Isaac told Andrew about his friends, “They are very bad men. I was forced to join them as they have bought me.” And it was true. They did very bad things to make money.

Isaac was tired of this life. He wanted to lead a straight and simple life. Isaac and Andrew made a plan. Isaac would put a sleeping pill into their tea, which would put his so-called friends to sleep, thus giving them time to escape.

It was 4 p.m.; Isaac had brought the medicine and put it into their tea. The men drank it with great enthusiasm. Now, he waited for the medicine to show its effect.

After a while, they were all fast asleep. Isaac opened Andrew's ropes. They locked the room where the men were

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sleeping and took off with the keys. When Andrew reached home, his parents were overjoyed. His mother could not stop hugging him. They heard Isaac and Andrew's story.

Isaac, along with Andrew, met the police. They informed them about the house's location and the dacoits' presence. The police immediately rushed to the scene to find the men trying to break open the door.

The police unlocked the door and captured the men. Andrew's father arranged for Isaac not to be punished. He also asked Isaac to work for him, ending the bad chapter in his life.

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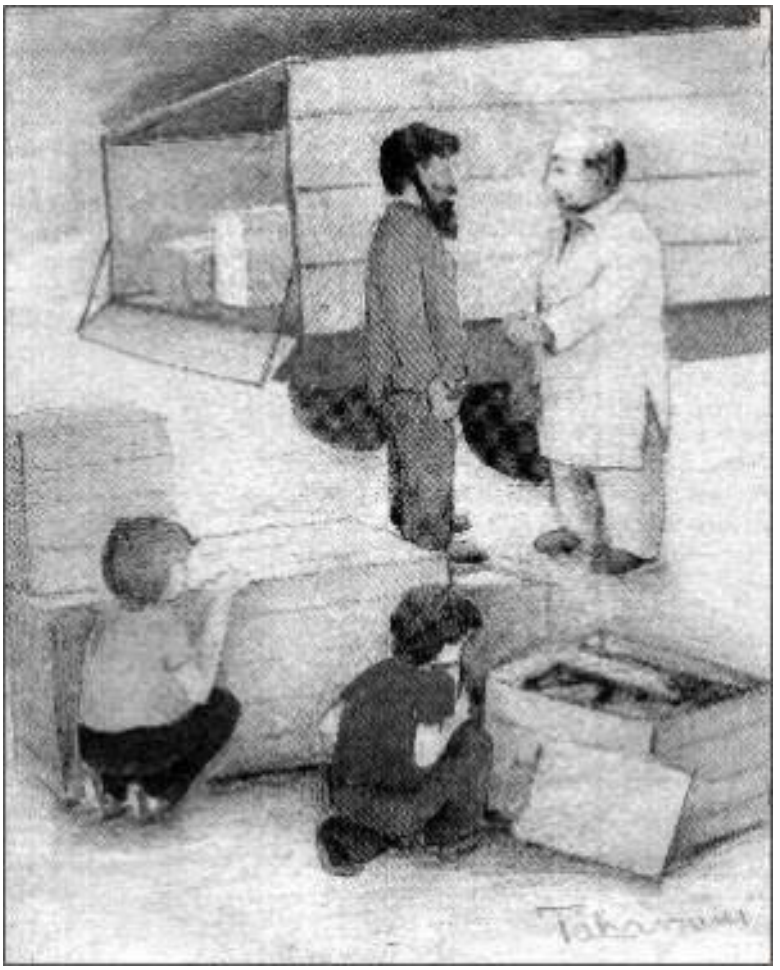
Going after the trucks



ONCE, my family and I were on our way home from Lahore when I saw a line of trucks passing us by. There were about ten trucks, all full of tons of boxes.

I asked my father where those trucks had come from. My

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father replied that hardly anyone knew anything about them, as they were all private trucks. I got very curious and asked Father where they were headed. He replied that they were headed towards Pindi, where our house is.

"In fact," he said, "their den is near our house"

I wanted to look for the trucks' den.

After a while, when we were about to reach home, I saw the trucks turn into a big garage. Now I knew exactly where the trucks were. And it would be very easy to find out about them, as I knew where they unloaded their boxes.

When we reached home, I ran to my room and called my friend, Asim, to ask him if he knew anything about the trucks. Fortunately, he did. He told me the truck company's name was 'Ahmed Trucks.' The owner of the company owned many trucks. I asked Asim to come over to my house.

The next morning, Asim arrived at my house. We talked for some time, and then we started our homework so that we could be free for the rest of the day. After about two hours, we stopped to take a break. During this time, we had lunch and later went to my room. I asked Asim if he could spend the night at my house. He agreed and called up his mother to inform her

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about his plans.

We discussed what we were going to do. I told Asim we could find out what those trucks carried. Asim agreed, as she, too, was curious. After telling my mother that we were going out for a ride in the evening, we left the house on our bikes and reached the den in about five minutes. On inspection, we noticed many sacks lying in front of the trucks. As we were moving around, we heard someone coming towards us. Quickly, we jumped behind the sacks and hid ourselves. Suddenly, two men appeared from behind the trucks. More men followed, one of them holding a remote, pressed a button that activated the garage door. The door closed immediately. The two men in suits came forward and started discussing some weapons to deliver. As time passed, I became very frightened and wondered if my mother was getting worried at home.

One of the men with a beard and a moustache asked the other man if he had delivered the weapons. The other man replied in a voice so low that I couldn't make out what he said. Just then, I heard a creaking sound. On turning, I saw my friend opening a big box. He signalled me to keep quiet. He opened

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the box to unveil weapons of different kinds. The guns, we noticed, were fully loaded. My friend whispered, "If we could only frighten these men by using these guns."

We both gathered our strength and picked up a gun each. My friend pointed the gun towards the men and started shooting; one of the men fell to the ground. Another man shot Asim, who fell and hit his head on the ground. Realizing I was left alone to face the gang, I quickly formed a plan.

My best option was to shoot at the chandelier, bringing it crashing down on some barrels containing diesel. The outcome was a massive confusion; I grabbed this opportunity to rush to a phone I had noticed lying on a table next to the entrance.

I dialled the number of a nearby police station and urged them to rush to the scene. Moments later, sirens were heard, and the police jeeps came crashing through the metal doors. The following events passed like lightning, with police personnel completely overtaking the scene and successfully arresting the whole gang.

After things returned to normal and the criminals had been taken away, the police inspector came up to us and said, "You must be the brave gentlemen who helped us capture these

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dangerous criminals. We had been on the lookout for them for the past two months but couldn't get hold of them. We really appreciate your efforts".

The police escorted Asim and me home. My parents were shocked to hear of our heroic efforts but praised us nonetheless.

The next day, the newspapers carried full details of our escapade. The story of our bravery spread like wildfire, and we did indeed become heroes' even if for one day.

Zeenat Iqbal Hakimjee, is a distinguished writer and daughter of a renowned journalist. With a rich educational background, Zeenat's narratives are enriched by her unique experiences, including her contributions to esteemed publications such as Dawn and The News. Her stories promise to captivate and delight readers, a testament to her exceptional talent and storytelling prowess. These tales offer an enjoyable and memorable reading experience, leaving a lasting impact on your imagination.

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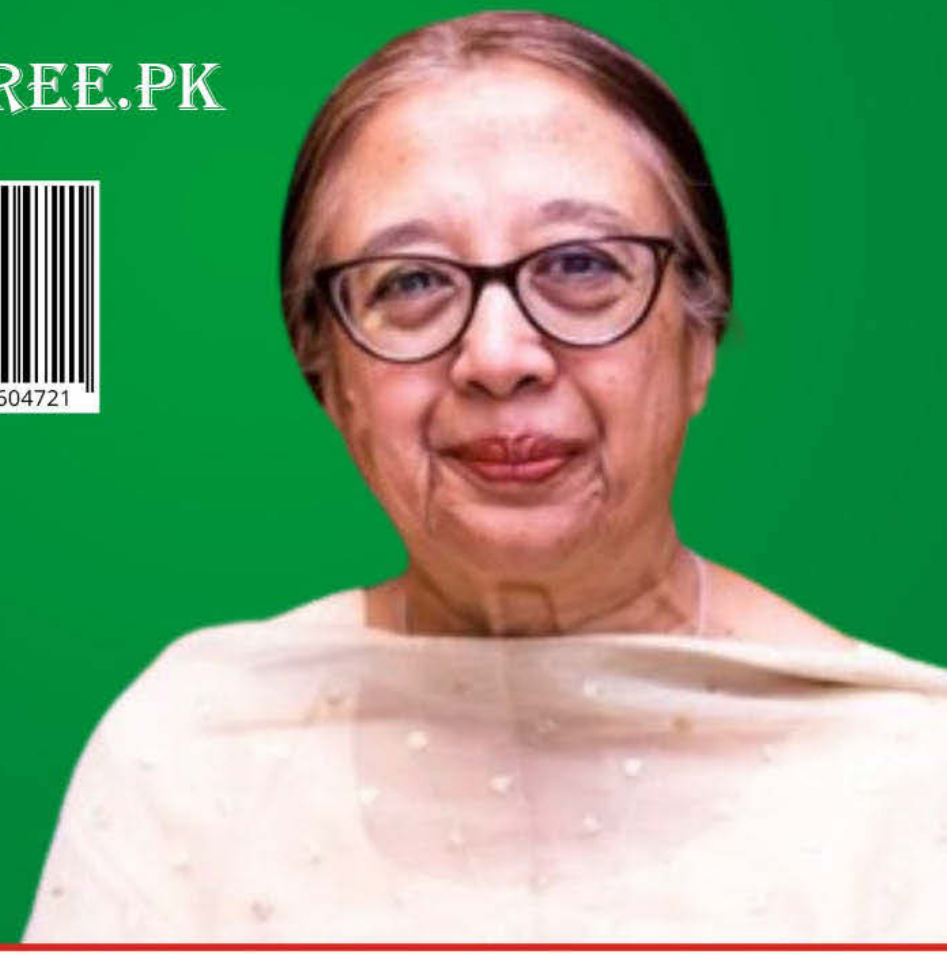

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